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Implications of Student Centered Education for the Neoliberal Regime of Government and Knowledge Economy in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper investigates the implications and assumptions of the student centered education model, which was embarked at the primary school level in Turkey in 2005. The questions posed in the article are: What are the idealized qualities of the self in this education model? Who is the educated subject? How do these correlate with the current political economy settlement? What kind of a rationality of government do all of these establish? Through these questions, the paper aims to investigate the correlation between the idealized subjectivity in the student centered education model and the assumptions of the knowledge economy and the neoliberal regime of government.

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1. Introduction

The adoption of the student centered education and constructivist principles in primary school education in 2005 has been one of the most significant and all encompassing regulations in the Turkish education system. One of the most crucial aspects of this regulation in the curriculum and the general pedagogical approach is the fact that it actually implies the project of integrating the education system to the needs of knowledge economy in the setting of global neoliberals. In this regard, the educational rearrangement is considered as a vital national strategy for a proper adaptation to the global economic structure by way of cultivating a specific sort of "self" as the educated subject, who being endowed with certain skills and characteristics is to be productive. The aim of this article is to investigate the promoted skills and presupposed qualities of the educated subject in order to examine the possible correlation between the ideal image of "self" in the student centered education with the requirements of knowledge economy.

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2. "Self" Defined Category of Neoliberal Politics of Knowledge Economy

This article employs the notions of "self" and "educated subject" as defined categories that have political implications. Through underlying tropes, descriptions, and assumptions, these notions imply particular ways of constructing the self. In this respect, they reveal the inscription of power in their discursive formation by indicating the ways of disciplining the capabilities of individuals in line with the desired forms of subjectivity (Fendler, 1998, p. 41). "The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome" (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). As Foucault claims, this is not necessarily a repressive feature of power; it is actually a productive means of generating subjectivities. It aims to augment the attributes and capabilities of individuals, which enables them to live in society in a particular form of subjectivity. However, the limits of actions and attributes are identified and settled in this process. In the recent curriculum reform, for example, the limits of the qualities and skills that are designated through the ordering act of power are actually determined by way of identifying particular skills and qualities to be promoted through educational discipline. To put it another way, these skills and attributes point out the desired form of subjectivity of individuals. For this reason, the skills underlined and targeted in the curriculum are significant in designating the idealized image of self, which is indeed a significant clue for understanding the inscription of power in constituting the form and content of the pedagogical approach.

In the context of the introduction of the student centered education and constructivist precepts in the Turkish education system, the ideal self along with the ideal societal arrangement is defined with reference to the neoliberal politics of knowledge economy. It is noted that in order to promote social and economic development in the contemporary world, what is needed is a different educational system which can provide a labour force that will adapt to the knowledge economy. The seventh report of the State Planning Organization (1996-2000) articulates this through the following remarks:

Well educated young population is going to be the biggest advantage of Turkey in the 2000s. For this reason, it is necessary to develop human resources that can contribute to knowledge production and that can use knowledge in a creative way. In this way, it is going to be possible to increase welfare and productivity (p. 20).

The following quote taken from one of the leading texts that introduces the student centered model also draws attention to a similar point stating the significance of urgent adaptation to the contemporary age through a reform in education (Ministry Of Education, 2005):

We, as the whole nation in general and the community of educators in particular, have to successfully interpret the tendencies of the future decades and build a unique model of individuality. It is an imperative and urgent to implement a course of action by developing an educational philosophy for this specific vision. This particular study of revising our educational programs is a reflection of this priority (p. 9).

At this point it is possible to ask the following questions: First, what is the relevance of the student centered model and constructivism for the development and sustainment of knowledge economy in Turkey? And second, how can we relate the self as configured in this educational approach with the self as envisioned to be economically productive and socially adaptive in the setting of the neoliberal knowledge economy? However, before discussing these question, we must first explicate the historical moment of changes in the economic structure that demands institutional arrangements in the field of education in Turkey.

3. Demands and requirements of knowledge economy for the revamping education

The decline of the welfare regime in the European nation states and the worldwide economic crisis of the 1970s paved the way for the post-industrial economic restructuring, which is based on neoliberals as the distinct

political theory of capitalism. There are various aspects of neoliberals that influence and change the structure and functioning of capital and state policies. One of these aspects that go along with a change in the organization and relation of markets and firms is the fast paced developments in technology. After the 1970's economic crisis, firms and financial markets went through a sort of restructuring towards transactions on a global scale along with an increase in knowledge production and accumulation and a revolution in the field of information and communication technologies (Castells, 2000, p. 135). As David Harvey (2005) indicates, the rapid improvement and development in these fields have enhanced the capacities of firms "to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace (p.3)." In this way, a global network of markets has been established. This global network joining firms and markets, based on knowledge production and transactions by way of information and communication technologies, has become the backbone of the current economic regime of neoliberals.

On the other hand, the patterns of production have shifted from industrial production to that of knowledge in the age of neoliberal political economy. It is possible to say that the current economic structure rests upon the increasing importance of knowledge. As Guile (2000) indicates, we live in an epoch in which the essentials of economy are defined by the "knowledge economy" thesis, which has brought forth knowledge as the primary means of production rather than labour or land (p.2). In such an economic context, knowledge itself becomes the economic value and source, which inevitably creates a change in the principles of production and the division of labour. Referring to David Bell's conceptualizations, Guile (2000) declares that as a consequence of this new economic trend, there have occurred two basic shifts in the features of labour power. One of these shifts has tended towards a service sector that entails white collar employers and employees in banking, finance or management sectors along with the increase in the number of people working in personal or leisure services. The other shift is the appearance of new specialized occupations which are mostly related to technical issues such as computing or software engineering.

This structural change in production and the appearance of new occupations along with the knowledge economy have brought forth new ways of correlation between education and economy. New roles and meanings are assigned to education in accordance with the changing expectations from the labour force, which is supposed to have specific attainments and skills compatible with the new economic regime such as learning to learn, strategy production, creativity, teamwork, spirit of entrepreneurship, technological culture, information technology communication skills, adaptability, and flexibility (Lyotard, 1984, p. 51). Moreover, as Tarman (2008) asserts, the abilities of reaching knowledge, using knowledge and producing knowledge have gained great significance since the current age requires knowledge to be produced by rapid renewal (p. 147). In order to define this contemporary condition, Shlomo Waks (1997) uses the phrase of "knowledge explosion". According to Waks, we live in an era when there is a huge accumulation and production of knowledge that creates constant turnovers in science, technology and related philosophical and theoretical approaches. Regarding the impact of such knowledge explosion on education, he further indicates that there is a need in educational practices from transmission to enculturation. In other words, through education, individuals should acquire necessary qualities such as innovative thinking skills, self-responsibility of learning, and self-realization that help them handle such an accumulation of knowledge by way of establishing individual and authentic ways of using knowledge in a productive and genuine way.

In this respect, the assumptions of constructivism appeal to the expectations from a contemporary education, which basically aims to empower the individual potentials of learners to attain and produce knowledge. In an environment of "knowledge explosion" in Waks' words, as there is no possibility of establishing lines of knowledge to be dictated or limiting learning to the school space, learners are encouraged to invent their own ways of seeking, finding and utilizing knowledge, just as constructivist principles presuppose. This is also one of the most essential aspects of the student centered education model, where constructivism is adopted as the underlying philosophy. *The Student Centered Education Application Model (Öğrenci Merkezli Eğitim Uygulama Modeli)* (Ministry Of Education, 2007) points out to the increase in knowledge accumulation as an incitement for a change in educational approach along with the growing importance of individual qualities in learning:

Because the amount of knowledge has increased greatly the structures (schools) and strategies, that are used to transmit knowledge in a direct and didactic way are shaken by knowledge based institutions which are aware of the necessity of constant learning at work (p. 8).

Such an emphasis on individuality and the importance of empowerment of individual qualities and differences in building up knowledge are recurrent themes in the related texts and documents. Therefore, the issue of empowerment of individuality through the constructivist educational approach and student centered education methods is the most prominent objective of the new pedagogical arrangement at the primary school level.

This quality of the new educational model implemented recently in the Turkish education system actually implies a particular configuration of the “self” as the learning and educated subject that rests upon the idea of empowerment of certain skills, capacities, and qualities. So, the realization of particular skills and characteristics is the ultimate actualization of the desired subjectivity. In other words, the self of learning subjects is actually a defined category, which is expected to be equipped with specific attainments and features.

4. Characteristics to promoted in the "self" both as an ideal educated subject in student centred education and as an ideal worker in knowledge economy

In various texts such as *Introductory Booklet of the Primary School Programs for the First through Fifth Grades (İlköğretim 1-5. Sınıf Programları Tanıtım El Kitabı)* (Ministry of Education, 2005), *The Student Centred Education Application Model* (Ministry of Education, 2005) as well as the course programs, the principles of the curriculum are elaborated with references to the presumed and expected qualities and skills of learning subjects. In the *Introductory Booklet* (Ministry Of Education, 2005), the expectations from students are listed as follows:

Students should take responsibility for their own learning, and they should realize their increasing responsibility in each grade. They are to be individuals who develop a vocabulary of scientific and technological notions; who can ask questions and criticize; who build, solve, and discuss their own problems; and who can make use the learning opportunities outside the classroom. Moreover, student should develop a consciousness about the security issues in their environment and should develop team work skills (p. 25).

In this definition, the themes of self-awareness and realization of self-responsibility, technological literacy, problem solving, team work and self-improvement are highlighted. Similar remarks are included in the *Student-Centred Education Application Model* as well (Ministry of Education, 2005):

(A student) knows herself and she is aware of her individual characteristics; she is willing to undertake self-improvement; she actualizes herself; she is willing to cooperate to do team work; she learns how to learn; she develops her thinking abilities; she transfers her academic abilities to life abilities; she has mastered effective communication; she uses technology effectively; she uses her time and energy in an effective way (p. 10).

These promoted characteristics of the self of the learning subjects are also in direct correlation with the social and economic basis of the curriculum that are explained in the *Introductory Booklet of the Primary School Programs for the First through Fifth Grades* (Ministry of Education, 2005). For instance, one aspect of the social basis of the curriculum is to engender in students the quality of flexibility in order to adapt themselves to the constant global and local changes:

It prioritizes gaining consciousness about changing in a positive way since change is inevitable in life. It provides guidance to students in not being influenced from the turnovers or from the obstacles that can occur in time of turnovers, and taking advantage of the developments; in adapting to the turnovers; in gaining abilities of risk management; and in taking risks if necessary (p. 22).

At this point, the quality of being flexible in the sense of taking utmost advantage of the changes and avoiding risks is underlined. Another quality (as the economic basis of the curriculum) is to have an entrepreneurial mind and soul:

The program emphasize a stabile, productive, and sustainable economy and they demand that students be integrated into economic life. Therefore, it is not content with analayze and producing ideas about the economic life of society, but it also provides guidance for evaluating the economic opportunities in a rapidly changing world. Thus, in our globalized world, the student with an entrepreneurial mind does not have any problems in adapting to his/her future professional life (p. 22).

As it is explicit in the quote, the economic basis of the curriculum promotes the entrepreneurship qualities in the self. Learning subjects are presumed to be in need of being integrated into the current economic structures endowed with an entrepreneurial mind set that would make them successful and productive in such a setting. With the help of such skills, subjects are suggested to be prepared for business life, having already internalized the rules and mentality of success.

Underlying these assumptions and anticipations, there is a certain vision about the individuality of students. This vision rests upon the idea of the importance the subjects' interest in and desire for education. It is asserted that the sustainable self development and lifelong learning of learners is crucial for social and economic achievements. In this respect, the curriculum is to cultivate the idea of sustainable learning and education, prompting the essential desire for education. Related to this, the *Introductory Booklet* (Ministry of Education, 2005) states that:

The programs acknowledge that lifelong learning is an indispensable requirement, and this is only possible by enjoying learning while in school; for this reason, the programs take some measures to ensure that students enjoy learning and learning to learn (p.22).

The same issue is touched upon in “The New Primary School Programs and New Approaches” (Yeni İlköğretim Programları ve Yeni yaklaşımlar) (Ministry of Education, 2005). Here, stimulating and encouraging the natural curiosity and desire for learning in students are stressed as crucial for encouraging lifelong learning. In this way, students are envisaged as subjects having an autonomous and instinctual drive to learn more; so, the matter is to unearth this desire as the necessary driving force for on going education. To put it another way, in this constructivist pedagogical approach, students are considered as having self-autonomy in constituting and managing their education essentially through the desire for learning. In this sense, what Lynn Fendler (1998) argues regarding the constructivist pedagogies is significant for the present discussion vis a vis the particular configuration of self:

[...] in constructivist pedagogies, which are advocated for their no positional pedagogies, to be educated means to be motivated to engage in problem solving; the educated subject of constructivism is a “constructed” learner who does not rely on authority for motivation to engage in scientific inquiry. The constructed learner [...] embodies the desire to identify with the educational curriculum (p. 58).

Positioning the learning subjects as autonomous and thus not being in need of external imposition and enforcement for learning depends on the idea that subjects embody the desire for being educated and constant augmentation of their capacities. “In other words, the educable subject is combined with the idea of learning as a norm; the will to learn is constructed as a mentality” (Fejes, 2008, p. 89).

As can be inferred from the aforementioned examples from the texts and the language used in the quotes, the goals of the curriculum are built upon certain assumptions regarding the self. To summarize, the primary quality of this particular conceptualization of the self is that learning subjects have an instinctual desire for learning and cultivating their capabilities by discovering and experiencing more; they are aware of their own qualities, which means they know themselves; they are conscious of the fact that they have to take responsibility for their own learning process; and they are rational enough to take the necessary measures both for their present and future success. Having such personal traits, students are expected to cultivate their selves with the skills of learning how to

learn, communicating and cooperating with others, utilizing information technologies, developing an entrepreneurial mentality, problem solving, flexibility and creativity.

All these qualities, attainments and skills regarding the configuration of the educated subject are not actually unique to student centred education in Turkey. There are direct correspondences between them and the ones enumerated in documents that talk about the general characteristics of the work force in the global knowledge economy settlement.

One of those primary documents that highlight the expectations from education in the neoliberal economic regime of knowledge economy is the *Education Policy Analysis* published in 2001 by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Prepared by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation within OECD, this report outlines the distinctive workplace competences in neoliberal regime of knowledge economy. According to this analysis, the leading “workplace competences” that are favoured in the current economic organization of companies and sectors can be gathered under three groups: inter-personal skills, intra-personal skills, technological or informational and communicational skills (ICT). Inter-personal skills are “team work and ability to co-operate in pursuit of a common objective; leadership capabilities”. Intra-personal skills are “motivation and attitude; the ability to learn; problem solving skills; effective communication with colleagues and clients; analytical skills” (OECD, 2001).

These skills defined as workplace competences in the OECD’s report are actually concur with new workplace practices and the rise of new sectors (OECD, 2001, p.107, 109). According to the OECD’s survey, these new working practices are based on job rotation, team-based work organizations or management structures, which overrate personal qualities such as flexibility, leadership and cooperation beside academic achievements (p.109). On the other hand, the extending service sector is also pointed out as an important factor that is influential in the encouragement of the workplace competences. In the survey, it is indicated that workers employed in this sector are demanded to have skills such as “ability to operate in an unclear and ever-changing environment; the capacity to deal with non-routine and abstract work processes; the ability to handle decisions and responsibilities; group and interactive work; and system wide or broad understanding” (p.110). Additionally, the introduction of the information and communication technologies has significant implications for the types of workplace competences. In this sense, there is a direct relation between the information technologies, work organization and individual skills. A combination of at least basic knowledge and competence of ICT technologies combined with personal and management skills such as communication, team-work, problem solving, creativity and leadership have become the preferred qualities (p.112).

The shift in the production patterns and the required skills is also noted in the World Bank’s report titled as *Lifelong Learning in the Global Knowledge Economy* (2003).

In traditional industries most jobs require employees to learn how to perform routine functions, which, for the most part, remain constant over time. Most learning takes place when a worker starts a new job. In the knowledge economy, change is so rapid that workers constantly need to acquire new skills. Firms can no longer rely solely on new graduates or new labour market entrants as the primary source of new skills and knowledge. Instead, they need workers who are willing and able to update their skills throughout their lifetimes (p. xviii).

The key skills, which are conceptualized as different from the ones possessed by traditional industrial workers and assumed to be embodied by an ideal worker in the knowledge economy setting, are listed in this particular report of the World Bank (2003) as “acting autonomously, using tools interactively and functioning in socially heterogeneous groups” (p. 21, 22). What is meant by “acting autonomously” is basically explicated as self-awareness. Here, actualizing one’s capacities, exercising autonomy, making proper choices, acting as future oriented, making career plans and taking responsibility are listed as the skills of autonomously acting subjects.

These skills mentioned in these reports and documents of OECD and World Bank are in direct correspondence with the targeted abilities and attainments of the student-centred education model launched at the primary school level in Turkey. In this respect, it is obvious that the “self” configured in the student-centred curriculum is actually inscribed by the tropes of knowledge economy as articulated in the reports of World Bank and OECD.

5. Disciplining and government through the idealization of specific qualities of the self as the “techniques of self”

All such definitions of the self in the curriculum actually produce normative judgements on the subjectivity of learners designating the parameters of discipline and government in accordance with the institutionally desired qualities of subjects and social form (Marshall, 1990, p.15). In other words, the subjective and social space are to be governed and regulated in order to achieve certain ends. Moreover, beside signalling the spaces of regulation and intervention, the appropriate techniques and strategies of government are also implied in such an act of designating the self.

Michel Foucault (1997) conceptualizes the notion of government “in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour” (p.81). As Nikolas Rose (1999) also argues, government works through the recognition of people’s freedom and capacity for action and it is exercised by implementing certain tactics to regulate that subjective capacity to act (p.4). At this point, desires, beliefs, interests and characteristics of people emerge as spaces of intervention and government, where power penetrates through diverse tactics and techniques in order to regulate the conduct of people. By appealing to bodies, emotions and thoughts of individuals, governmental techniques of power actually designate how one relates to himself/herself, how s/he constitutes his/her personality and through which codes of morality and ethics. So, regarding the notion of “governmental”, it is possible to assert that the curriculum and pedagogical assumptions are indeed spaces where the techniques of power are articulated and re/produced. In the framework of the student centred education model and the constructivist principles adopted in the Turkish education system, empowerment of individuality through life-long learning principles and the specific capacities and skills (such as being self-learning, creative, entrepreneur, capable of using information technologies, able to solve problems) are significant clues for the techniques of power. Underlying the emphasis on the individuality of learners and the competences to be augmented in learning subjects, there is actually a particular form of government of conduct along with a specific figure of subjectivity, which involves certain possibilities of action and moral precepts. The new curriculum design offers a specific inscription of norms and identifications of subjectivity and self as the techniques of government.

The essential aspect of the norms of subjectivity as it is configured in the curriculum and the student centred educational model is the self-responsibility of students. As a value and norm of the ideal self, self-responsibility is employed as a trope in various ways in the student centred educational model. The first step in inculcating self-responsibility is the cultivation of self-autonomy in the learning subjects during the learning process, by attributing the role of attaining knowledge to students. As noted earlier, students are expected in this educational arrangement to take the responsibility of learning on themselves. In this regard, it is worth to mention once again the remarks in *The Introductory Booklet* (Ministry of Education, 2005): “Students should take responsibility for their own learning, and they should realize their increasing responsibility in each grade” (p. 25). Moreover, as self-responsible agents, students are also assumed to be capable of controlling and regulating their learning processes, having the autonomy of constructing and utilizing knowledge by active participation. In this respect, one of the implications of self-responsible learning subjects is self-autonomy together with active agency. The other aspect of how self-responsibility is employed as a norm of subjectivity is the idea of growing self-consciousness of one's identity. Being autonomous and active agents of learning, students are also responsible for knowing their own personal traits and qualities, according to which they are expected to direct and improve their interests and capacities throughout their educational life.

The norms of active agency, self-autonomy and self-consciousness, based on the idea of self-responsibility, actually indicate the techniques of self boosting in the student-centred educational model to be internalized by students as the norms of identity. In other words, these techniques of self are imposed on learners as the appropriate traits. Furthermore, these values are attached a moral quality, being a measure of discipline and success. In this model, discipline is stated to be achieved not through external force, but by way of individuals’ willing participation and self-responsibility (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 21). The student centred education model acknowledges that discipline and obeying the rules are the practices to be internalized and practiced by students as self-responsibility. “It acknowledges that obeying rules and discipline is for the sake of students, and therefore it expects students to undertake this task” (Ministry of Education, 2005a).

This aspect of the student centred education model regarding the envisioning of self as self-responsible, self-autonomous and self-disciplined is in direct relation with the rationality of government of neoliberalism. One of the essentials of neoliberal government is the “promotion of individual and national well-being by their (people’s) responsibility and enterprise” (Rose, 1999, p. 139). Positioning individual agents as the main actors of economic functioning, neoliberalism seeks to govern society through the governance of individual aspirations towards the ethics of free market exchange. In this respect, neoliberalism promotes the belief that individual, social, and national well being and prosperity depend upon the cultivation of individuals’ capacities and characteristics for maximum adaptation to the economic structure. In this envisioning of social betterment, individuals should enterprise their capabilities and qualities, managing their own life and handling possible risks (Dean, 1999). Therefore, the production of self-responsible, autonomous, and active subjects becomes the main governmental aim of neoliberalism. To put it another way, under the neoliberal regime, individuals are governed through their aspirations for self-responsibility and self-actualization as active agents. As Graham Burchell (1996) puts it:

Liberalism, particularly its modern versions, constructs a relationship between government and the governed that increasingly depends upon the ways in which individuals are required to assume the status of being the subjects of their own lives, upon the ways in which they fashion themselves as certain kinds of subjects, upon the ways in which they practice their freedom. Government increasingly impinges upon individuals in their very individuality, in their relationships to themselves in the conduct of their lives (p.30).

As a general inference from these discussions about neoliberal regime of government and self-responsibility on the part of students, it can be suggested that the pedagogical approach of student- centred education model ultimately aims at providing students with the tools of controlling the self through identifying and fulfilling specific duties and responsibilities on their own. In this sense, it is possible to maintain that it promotes the neoliberal rationality of government beginning at the level of primary school. It configures the educated subject as self-responsible and self-governing. The moral relation of the learning subjects with themselves is to be regulated with an aim to “produce the human being as a moral creature capable of exercising responsible stewardship and judgement over its own conduct in terms of certain externally prescribed moral principles” (Rose, 1999, p. 42). To put it another way, learning subjects are made accountable for their acquired norms of conducts and they are subjected to their own self-regulation (Dean, 1999, p. 11).

6. Concluding remarks

Such an approach to education that prioritizes the self-governing capacity of learners as a tool of discipline and moral regulation is therefore a specific one differentiated from the previous pedagogical approaches. In the teacher centred educational models based on the utilization of reinforcements and didactic transition of knowledge, the self is configured as to be disciplined by the external power of a sovereign and autonomous teacher. However, the student centred education model, which establishes a neoliberal approach to subjectivity and government, cultivates the self-disciplining capacity of learners by way of empowering their individuality in accordance with the values of self-responsibility and self-autonomy; that is, these educational methods produce governable individuals, who already conduct their own bodies, actions, interest or desires.

In this respect, the student centred education model introduces a new perspective not only for pedagogical arrangements, but also for the government of the subjects in the setting of the new economy.

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